

LESLEY BRAIDING: HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Chancellor Dharker, members of the University, distinguished alumni and honoured guests,

Lesley Braiden is a passionate believer in the transformative power of education, who throughout her career has striven to help students overcome barriers and fulfil their potential. She has been equally committed to empowering staff and enabling them to flourish, inspiring a generation of colleagues to deliver an outstanding educational experience at Newcastle. She retired as Academic Registrar in 2019, after 32 years at the University and her achievements were nationally recognised in 2020 by the award of an MBE for Services to Higher Education.

Lesley Howard was born in Chesterfield, Derbyshire in 1956. She was named after the actor Leslie Howard, who was a favourite of her mother's. As a child, she disliked her name, mainly because people often spelt it incorrectly and assumed she was a boy. Like many young girls, Lesley was mad about show-jumping and would have loved a pony of her own. When this wasn't forthcoming, ever resourceful, she settled for the next best thing – show-jumping rabbits, named Freddie and Titch. She and her brother, David, constructed a series of

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small jumps and tried to entice the rabbits round the course. I'm told that Lesley and David enjoyed the experience far more than the rabbits did!

Whilst initially intending to study Mathematics, Lesley eventually settled on German Language and Literature at Manchester University. After graduating with First Class Honours, she completed a PGCE at Durham University before joining Greenfield Comprehensive School in Newton Aycliffe as a teacher of French, German and Maths. The experience of supporting children from less advantaged backgrounds to fulfil their potential had a lasting impact on Lesley, who told me, "There were many young people whose circumstances were very challenging, but who nevertheless were keen to learn and grasp opportunities. They somehow had a spark burning brightly, which needed to be nurtured as the way out of poverty or deprivation."

Lesley joined the University in 1987 as an Administrative Assistant in the Admissions Office. She rapidly got to grips with the myriad acronyms and complex committee structures that are part and parcel of University Life, including Senate Matriculation and Concessions Committee, where she recalls that the accompanying documents usually went three times round the alphabet! Over the next 26 years, her career flourished. By 2003, she was Director of Student Recruitment, a role which soon expanded to include Director of

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Marketing and Communications. In 2013, she became Academic Registrar, a role she held until her retirement.

Lesley's friends and colleagues have shared many lovely anecdotes with me highlighting her kindness, integrity, generosity and wicked sense of humour. There are far too many to squeeze into a brief citation, but I would like to mention one story from Lesley's brother, David. Whilst Lesley was on study placement in Germany during her degree studies, she kept in touch with her family by letter – remember those days before mobile phones? With one of her letters home, she enclosed a note for her brother from a fellow student called Jutta Liebesnest, who, according to Lesley, was very keen on the idea of an English boyfriend. David, who was about fifteen at the time, didn't know any German, and proudly told all his friends that he now had a German girlfriend. It was only when he shared the news with a teacher, who gently pointed out that the English translation of Jutta Liebesnest was Judith Lovenest, that he realised his big sister had played a practical joke on him. Lesley, I think David has forgiven you – but he still has the letter!

It would be impossible to deliver a citation for Lesley without mentioning what is arguably the crowning achievement of her career. In 1997, Tony Blair's government announced a new campaign to broaden and diversify participation in

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Universities, thereby launching the era of Widening Participation. As with any new initiative, it was not without controversy. Critical voices both within and without academia expressed concern about the risk of “dumbing down” curricula. Others feared that if students from less advantaged backgrounds were accepted with lower A level grades, they would lack the ability to succeed at University. State schools and colleges were sceptical as to whether Universities were serious about making these changes, whilst public schools feared this would mean fewer University places for their students. When Lesley was asked to be the professional services lead in responding to the Government’s agenda, some might have regarded it as a poisoned chalice; but this is Lesley we are talking about, so of course the PARTNERS Scheme, as it became known, was a resounding success. We began with forty-four students and to date, have welcomed more than eight thousand students to Newcastle University under this flagship scheme, which is now one of the largest and most sustained Widening Participation programmes in the UK.

A project of this scale is inevitably an ensemble piece, but Lesley was the driving force and her skills were critical to its success. Emerita PVC for Education, Professor Suzanne Cholerton, sums them up beautifully, praising Lesley for her, “ability to bring on side even the most challenging person with a combination of intelligence, clarity of communication and warmth ... her reliability, fairness,

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integrity, good counsel, and finally her wonderful sense of humour...” were also key factors in her success.

What else can I tell you about Lesley? One of her greatest passions outside of work is music. Her singing career began in the Upper Sixth, when, to her surprise and delight, she was asked to take the lead soprano’s role in the school production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. This marked the start of a solo singing career, embracing church choral music, light opera and sacred oratorio performances. It was through music she met her future husband, Emeritus Professor Paul Braiden. As Lesley recounted it to me, she was invited to join the Elvet Methodist Church Choir in Durham, of which Paul was then Choir Master and Tenor soloist. Upon being introduced to him as “another soprano”, he didn’t look particularly impressed and she thought he would have much preferred a new tenor, as good ones are always in short supply. Like all good researchers, I’ve checked this story out from another perspective. Paul tells me that he very quickly realised she had the most exquisite voice and was far and away the best soprano in the choir. They soon became great friends and travelled around the country together to various musical events where both were performing. Eventually, friendship turned to love, and they were married in in 1993. I am indebted to Paul for discretely lending me a recording of Lesley in a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*. Having

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overcome the slight technical challenge of locating a functioning cassette player, I feel privileged to say that I now know how truly beautiful her voice is.

In addition to their shared love of music, Paul and Lesley are big fans of classic cars, and look forward to the Classic Car event of the season at Goodwood, where spectators are encouraged to attend in period dress. They are also enthusiastic cyclists, though Paul is more of a purist in this regard, preferring to rely on sheer muscle power to tackle challenging terrain, whereas Lesley takes a more pragmatic approach, smoothly cruising up hills on her electric bike. And then of course there is Hester, their beautiful, bouncy springer spaniel. I haven't met her in person yet, but I've been highly entertained by Lesley's videos of her latest escapades.

In all the years I've been delivering citations, this is the first time I've done one for someone whom I'm proud to call a friend. Dear Lesley, I do hope I've done you justice.

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Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of her sector-leading contribution to widening participation and her inspirational leadership and development of talent, I present to you Lesley Braiden, MBE, to be accepted into the Fellowship of Newcastle University.

Citation by Jill Taylor-Roe

Senior Public Orator

4th May, 2023